

## Coping With Pet Loss

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*By Maxine K.*

"Bunnies we love don't go away, they hop beside us every day, unseen, unheard, but always near, still loved, still missed and very dear."

Anyone who has loved a house rabbit knows how intelligent, sensitive, and loving they are. Our rabbits are not "just pets"; they're a member of the family. Sadly, their lives are tragically short in comparison to our own. The average life span of a rabbit is 7-10 years. No matter how well we care for and love them, sooner or later we all must confront their passing. Unfortunately, our society is not always sympathetic to the plight of pet owners. This can leave the grieving person feeling misunderstood and isolated. Fortunately, there are many excellent resources available to help the grieving rabbit owner work through their pain.

Intense grief over the loss of your bunny is a normal and natural response. There is nothing silly or crazy about grieving your pet's loss. For some, the loss of a rabbit is as equally traumatizing as the death of a human family member. People who do not understand the pet/owner bond may not understand your pain, but that does not make it any less real. "Part of losing a companion animal is knowing that no other pet or person will ever fill that special place." (Adapted from the Michigan State University Pet Loss Support Hotline) Do not allow anyone to dictate your grief timeline. On Homevet.com, Connecticut veterinarian Dr. Jeff Feinman says, "Realize that you do not need anyone's approval to mourn the loss of your pet, nor must you justify your feelings to anyone."

Grief is a universal reaction, but everyone experiences it differently. For some, grief is experienced in stages. Confusion, anger, guilt and depression are all common responses to the death of a beloved pet. Others find that grief is more cyclical, coming in waves, or a series of highs and lows.

Grieving is a gradual process. There is no set timeline for healing. According to Moira Allen, author of *Coping with Sorrow on the Loss of Your Pet*, "Grief is our final expression of love, the last gift we have to offer. It isn't to be rushed." Some people will start to feel better in a matter of weeks or months; for others, the process is measured in years. Whatever your experience, it's important to be patient with yourself and allow the process to unfold. Don't let society dictate how long mourning should last. Ignoring your pain or "bottling it up" will only make it worse in the long run.

There are several things that the grief-stricken owner can do to assist themselves in the healing process. First, give yourself permission to grieve. Only you know what your bunny meant to you. Find a way to memorialize your pet. This makes the loss real and helps you to get closure. Eat right, exercise, and get plenty of rest. Surround yourself with others who understand your loss. Take advantage of online support groups and rabbit forums for bereaved pet owners. Learn all you can about the grief process. This will help you to see that what you are experiencing is normal. Accept the feelings that come with grief. Give yourself permission to backslide. Holidays, smells, sounds, or certain words can trigger a relapse. Be sure to consult a "Higher Power", whatever that means for you. Finally, don't be afraid to seek professional help if you need it. There are numerous pet loss counselors in the Washington, D.C. area who are specially trained to assist you in working through your pain. A list of resources is provided at the end of this article. It may help to take comfort in the fact that you gave your bunny a good life, one which he or she might otherwise not have had. Many rabbits die alone in hutches through neglect. Still others are set "free" only to die at the hands of predators.

Humans are not the only ones who experience grief. While you are mourning the loss of your bunny, you must be careful not to neglect the needs of our other pets, particularly if your rabbit was part of a bonded pair. In fact, grieving pets can show many symptoms identical to those experienced by the bereaved pet owner. The



Photo: Beck B.

surviving pet(s) may become restless, anxious and depressed. They may have trouble sleeping or refuse to eat. You can help your pet cope with the loss by keeping his routine as normal as possible. Be attentive and loving, but try not to overdo it as this can contribute to separation anxiety. Allow the surviving animals to work out the new dominance hierarchy themselves. Finally, do not rush to get another pet to help the grieving pet(s) unless you are ready; this will backfire if you are not emotionally ready.

There are many wonderful reasons to consider adopting another rabbit, but the decision of when to do so is a very personal one. It may be tempting to rush out and fill the void left by your bunny's death by immediately getting another pet. But your beloved bunny was unique and can never be "replaced." In most cases, it's best to mourn the lost bunny first and wait until you're emotionally ready to open your heart and home to a new rabbit. You will know when the time is right. Yes, you risk loss by loving again, but the rewards are well worth it. "The act of bringing a new animal into your life shows courage, strength, and hope for the future." (Recover-from-grief.com). And Friends of Rabbits will be here when you're ready to adopt your new best friend.

#### **HOTLINES:**

**Washington, DC:** <http://peopleanimalslove.org/programs/pet-loss/>

**VA/MD:** Virginia-Maryland Regional College of Veterinary Medicine, <http://www.vetmed.vt.edu/centaur/service-programs.asp>

#### **SUPPORT GROUPS:**

**Alexandria:** Kathy Reiter, Animal Welfare League of Alexandria, Vola Lawson Animal Shelter, 4101 Eisenhower Ave., Alexandria, VA 22304, 703-746-4774, [staff@alexandrianimals.org](mailto:staff@alexandrianimals.org), <http://alexandrianimals.org/pet-bereavement.html>. Meets the 1st Wednesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. in the shelter's community room. Free; all welcome.

**Fairfax:** Kathy Reiter, Fairfax County Animal Shelter, 4500 West Ox Rd., Fairfax, VA 22030, (703) 830-1100, [http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/police/animal/pet\\_support\\_meetings.htm](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/police/animal/pet_support_meetings.htm). Meets 3rd Wednesday of every month at 7:00 p.m.

**Frederick:** Lou A. Lichti, Ph.D., City Park Psychological Services, LLC, 209 W. Patrick Street, Frederick, MD 21701, 301.401.2813. (Enter through 211, 1st door on right. Pet Death and Bereavement Support Group: Meets Tuesdays 6-7, Fee: \$40 payable before meeting by cash, check or credit card. Owners of Terminally or Chronically Ill Pet Support Group: Meets Wednesdays 6-7, Fee: \$40 payable before meeting by cash, check or credit card. Please email [drlou@cityparkpsychological.com](mailto:drlou@cityparkpsychological.com) or call 301.401.2813 by the day before to reserve a seat. <http://cityparkpsychological.com/services/pet-loss-support-group/>

**Reistertown:** Nicodemus Memorial Park at Baltimore Humane Society, 1601 Nicodemus Rd., Reisterstown, MD, 410-833-8848, <http://www.bmorehumane.org/->. The group meets the first Tuesday evening of each month at 7pm for one hour. Please call to RSVP. Call 410-833-8848 ext. 219 or email [amazan@bmorehumane.org](mailto:amazan@bmorehumane.org). Or visit our Facebook Bereavement Group Page for online help. Counseling, memorial and cremation services also provided.

**Rockville:** Dr. Mary Knipmeyer, Montgomery County Humane Society Pet Bereavement Seminar, Montgomery County Animal Shelter, 14645 Rothgeb Dr., Rockville, MD, 240-773-5973, [petbereavement@mchumane.org](mailto:petbereavement@mchumane.org), <http://www.mchumane.org/your-pet/bereavement/>

#### **COUNSELORS:**

**Alexandria:** Dr. Ursula Weide, PhD, JD, LPC, FT, 801 N. Pitt Street, Suite 113, Alexandria, VA 22314, 703-548-3866, [sevenfortyseven400@earthlink.net](mailto:sevenfortyseven400@earthlink.net), <http://www.coping-with-loss-and-grief.com>


**Bethesda:** Dr. Ursula Weide, PhD, JD, LPC, FT, 4405 East-West Hwy., Suite 310, Bethesda, MD 20814, 240-229-1893, [sevenfortyseven400@earthlink.net](mailto:sevenfortyseven400@earthlink.net), <http://www.coping-with-loss-and-grief.com>

**Silver Spring:** Robyn Zeiger, PhD, 10300 Sweetbriar Parkway, Silver Spring, MD 20903, (301) 445-7333, [rzeiger@drrobynzeiger.com](mailto:rzeiger@drrobynzeiger.com), <http://www.drrobynzeiger.com/>

**Websites:** <http://www.aplb.org/> - Nonprofit Association for Pet Loss & Bereavement. Professionally trained volunteers offer free pet bereavement counseling.

<http://www.petloss.com> - Supportive forums, phone counseling resources, candle-lighting ritual and general information

<http://www.griefhealing.com/comfort-grieving-animal-lovers.htm> -- a grief support website with a varied and informative pet loss section



Send your fond memories of bunnies who have passed over the Rainbow Bridge for inclusion in our Memorials section to:

[editor@friendsofrabbits.org](mailto:editor@friendsofrabbits.org)

